



Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

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Abraham Lincoln's Vision of the Reconstruction

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Although a great deal is known about Lincoln's role in the Civil War, many are unfamiliar with his plans for the Reconstruction. This may be due, in part, to his assassination before he could carry out his plans to repair and rebuild a nation left ravaged by the Civil War.

Lincoln had called the Reconstruction, "The greatest question ever presented to practical statesmanship." Lincoln knew that he would have to face one of the most difficult dilemmas in the history of this country. He believed that the best way to heal the country was to quickly reassemble the former Union and make peace with the Confederacy. His plan called for a more gentle approach than was proposed by other parties of the day, specifically, the radical Republicans'. He designed a system that he hoped would convince the rebellious states to renounce their allegiance with the Confederacy and rejoin the Union. Under his program, all Southerners, except those who had held high-ranking Confederate offices, could swear an oath that pledged future loyalty to the Union and acknowledged the end of slavery to get their rights restored along with a full pardon. Lincoln thought this would dishearten the South enough that it would surrender and give up the fight. When ten percent of the total population of the state had taken the oath, the citizens of that state would be able to vote to change their state's government and constitution to honor the Emancipation Proclamation. Once the

state's new anti-slavery government and constitution were created and ratified, the seceded state could be fully re-admitted to the Union.

Even before his death, Lincoln's plan had already begun losing support with Northerners. They believed his plan was not strict enough to properly deal with and punish the South. Others complained that, under his plan, blacks were not permitted to swear the oath of loyalty to the Union, nor were they granted the rights to vote or hold office.

Even though, when he assumed the presidency in 1865, Andrew Johnson intended to further the Reconstruction as Lincoln might have desired, he made some unpopular changes to Lincoln's plan. Under Johnson's plan, he would appoint governors for the rebellious states. Johnson allowed the governors that he had selected to appoint members to their administrations that had very strong Southern ideals, a direct contradiction to Lincoln's ideals. The new Southern governments then enacted a system of laws, called the Black Codes, in an attempt to undermine the federal authority and the Emancipation Proclamation by restricting blacks' rights and imposing harsh taxes on those who did not continue working as plantation laborers.

By December 1865, many Republicans in Congress had come to the conclusion that Andrew Johnson's agenda for Reconstruction desperately needed modification. Consequently, Congress passed a bill to extend the length of the Freedmen's Bureau, as well as the Civil Rights Bill, to aid the ailing reconstruction program. President Johnson subsequently vetoed both bills. Radical and moderate Republicans in Congress responded in outrage to Johnson's vetoes by forming a coalition, overriding the vetoes and initiating the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Following the elections of

1866, Congress effectively eliminated all of Johnson's control over Reconstruction and ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. They passed the Reconstruction Acts, which divided the Southern states into military districts, giving control of constitutional conventions to the Union's military commanders. Congressional control and harsh policy led to a prolonged timeline of Reconstruction, resulting in violent attacks against blacks and white Republicans in the South, contrary to Abraham Lincoln's vision of an expedited recovery from the Civil War.

Our sixteenth President's valiant effort to restore peace to the land he loved most was interrupted as the result of an assassin's bullet. Lincoln did not live long enough to implement his plan fully. It has taken nearly 150 years for America to rise above racism and infringement on African American civil rights. We have recently elected our first African American President, a historic moment in America's history. Perhaps if Lincoln had been able to remain President, rather than Andrew Johnson, some of the suffering may have been avoided. [From "Andrew Johnson." Whitehouse.gov. The White House. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/aj17.html> (Nov. 19, 2008); Joyce

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